DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 204 283 SP 018 126

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TITLE Encouraging Curriculum Relevance in a Rural School Environment.
PUB DATE Feb 81
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association of Teacher Educators (Dallas, TX, February 13-18, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Ability Grouping; *Curriculum Design; Educational Strategies; Elementary Secondary Education; Family School Relationship; *Individualized Instruction; *Learning Centers (Classroom); Learning Experience; Observational Learning; *Relevance (Education); *Rural Education; Socialization

ABSTRACT

The curriculum design of an experimental project school established in rural area in Missouri in 1917 formed the basis for developing a modern curriculum of individually guided education in the same area 60 years later. The original "project method" school operated with a curriculum selected directly from the real life experiences or purposes of the students. These students worked in three multi-age groups whose ages ranged from six through fourteen. A description is given of the organization and rationale of a curriculum that incorporates the "project method" into a school-wide system of individually guided education. Basic to this system is the concept of the learning center, in which activities are provided to reach goals which could be different for each student. Center activities are designed for individual or group use, and students are grouped by interest and ability rather than by age. (JD)

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ENCOURAGING CURRICULUM RELEVANCE IN A RURAL SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

Dr. James V. Sandrin

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association of Teacher Educators (Dallas, TX, February 13-18, 1981)

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TITLE: ENCOURAGING CURRICULUM RELEVANCE IN A RURAL SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

James V. Sandrin and Erin Ray

This is an account of two significant educational happenings in McDonald County, Missouri. The two educational ventures are separated by some 60 years. However, both have relevance for today's educators in terms of individualizing and personalzing instruction for students. The two educational ventures are Ellsworth Colling's project curriculum method (1) and Individually Guided Education (IGE) as practiced in the rural Rocky Comfort School, McDonald County Mo. School District.

An experimental project method school was established in rural McDonald County in 1917. This method flourished from 1917 to 1922 and its main thrust was that "a school could operate effectively with the curriculum selected directly from a real life experiences or purposes of students".

During the years 1917-1922, 41 students taught by a teacher and an aide under Colling's supervision showed that a school organized around the project method could operate effectively. Students in Colling's school worked in three multi-age groups and were engaged in the subsequent four types of projects: (1) story, (2) hand, (3) play and (4) excursion. For example, the first group "A" consisted of children whose ages ranged from 6 thru 8; the second group "B" recorded ages 9 thru 11 and the third group "C" was composed of students whose ages were 12 and 13 with a sometimes 14 year old.

The kinds of projects Colling's students accomplished were selected and worked out over a four year span of time. Space does not allow for a complete listing of projects. However, selected projects for the "A" group consisted of:

(1) How the pine tree differs from the cedar

(2) How Mr. Long crates his cantaloupes for shipment

(3) Watching the caterpillars turn into butterflies

(4) Finding out how wheat is made at McNatt

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The "B" group engaged in many different projects illustrated by the following:

(1) How Mr. Chase's poultry house is constructed

(2) How Willie will be tried in the juvenile court at Pineville

(3) How Dr. Morgan vaccinates Mr. Jones hogs

(4) Participating in the Armistice Day program at Pineville

The kinds of experiences the "C" group accomplished were:

(1) How taxes are collected at Pineville

(2) Why the county Democratic and Republican candidates believe they should be elected as explained by them at two political meetings

(3) How the McDonald County Bank handles our money

(4) How electricity is made at the Noel Electric Plant

(5) How the Weather Bureau of Joplin predicts weather conditions published in the JOPLIN DAILY GLOBE

The 1976 Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) Yearbook (2) describes comparisons between the Colling's project method school and two closely matched control schools:

> "Comparisons were made between the Colling's school and two closely matched control schools. Even though in the experimental school, traditional subject matter was learned subordinately only as it was needed, academic achievement measured by standard achievement tests was higher than in the control schools, although the differences, except for geography, were small. In all other comparisons, however, great differences favored the experimental school. These differences were manifest in pupil's attitude toward school (e.g., attendance, tardiness), children's conduct outside the school (e.g., reading habits, practice of certain health habits), parents attitudes toward school (e.g., voting record on school issues, using the school as a resource), parents' conduct in the home and community (e.g., testing seeds before planting, incidence of contagious diseases), and introduction of home conveniences (e.g., screened doors and windows)".

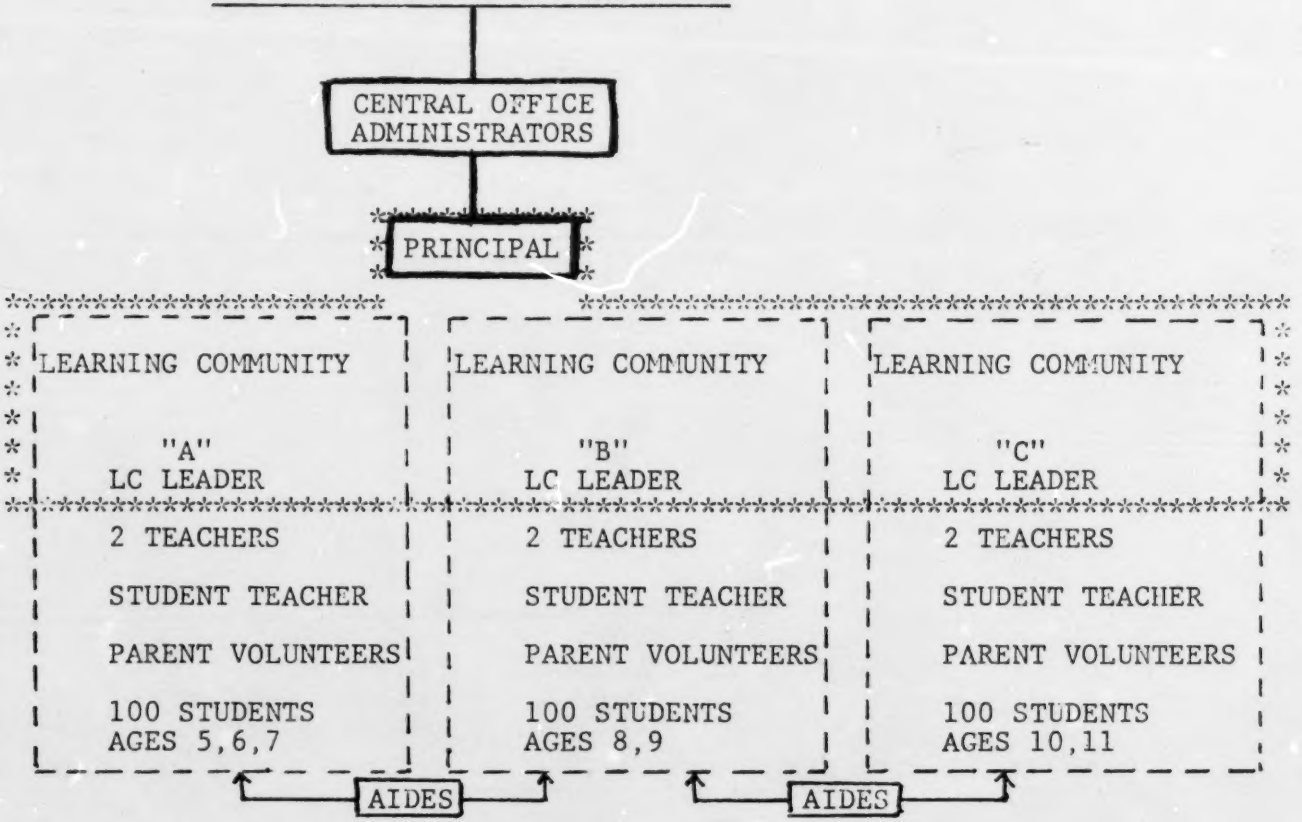
The 1976 ASCD Yearbook further states that Colling's school and his research on the project method do not deserve obscurity. They state that Colling's curriculum strategy seems to merit renewed attention. For a more detailed account of Colling's school and findings the reader is encouraged to read Chapter 4 of the 1972 ASCD Yearbook.

In the spirit and tradition of Colling's school and his significant research findings Rocky Comfort School of the McDonald County School District is moving towards a system of individualizing instruction for all of its students with a concomitant process of continuous improvement or in-servicing of teachers to accomplish individualization. This change process, unlike Colling's school, is not experimental. It is a proven and viable educational design termed Individually Guided Education (IGE) In 1970, there were 125 schools participating in the IGE change process. Today, more than 1,700 schools in 36 states, plus American sponsored schools in about two dozen other countries, are in some phase of implementing the IGE design. Each phase of developing IGE has been accompanied by special attention to evaluation and research.

As in the Colling's school, IGE utilizes a system of multi-age grouping, (See Chart I) with students assigned to Learning Communities (LC's) by age rather than by grade levels.

CHART I

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE - IGE



KEY: - - - LEARNING COMMUNITY
***** PROGRAM IMPROVEMENT COMMITTEE

GUIDANCE COUNSELORS
ART INSTRUCTORS
PHYSICAL EDUCATION
MUSIC INSTRUCTOR
LIBRARIAN
SPECIAL EDUCATION

: SUPPORT STAFF FOR LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Other distinct characteristics of an IGE school include the following:

(1) Learning programs based on the cycle: preassessment, behavioral objectives, differentiated learning activities, and post-assessment.

(2) Use of differing learning modes such as large group instruction, small group instruction, independent study, and one-to-one.

(3) An essentially self-sustaining inservice program for professional self-improvement.

(4) A planned home-school communications system.

(5) Linked with other cooperating schools into a "League"

(6) A Program Improvement Committee (PIC) which facilitates the principal serving as the instructional leader and fosters leadership among teachers.

The Colling's school stressed the project method curriculum. The Rocky Comfort School uses a variety of strategies along with the project method. One of the strategies is the Learning Center or Activity approach. By defintion, a Learning Center is an instructional device developed with a specific goal in mind. Activities are provided to reach an outcome (which could be different for each student). Center activities may be designed for individual or group use. The activities may be self-checking or open ended. Means of evaluation when appropriate are included into the Learning Center design.

IGE is geared toward 35 specific outcomes which hopefully will be realized by the school's staff within a five year period of time. After the implementation and refinement of the 35 outcomes, the school may construct additional outcomes as they deem appropriate. The above mentioned 35 outcomes are divided into 7 clusters with sample outcomes listed for each cluster:

CLUSTER I-Adoption and Implementation

EXAMPLE: All staff members have had an opportunity to examine their own goals and the IGE outcomes before a decision is made to participate in the IGE program.

CLUSTER II- School Decisions

EXAMPLE: The Program Improvement Council (PIC) coordinates school-wide in-service programs for the total staff.

CLUSTER III Learning Community Organization

EXAMPLE: The entire school is organized into Learning Communities with each Learning Community (LC) composed of students, teachers, aides, and a Learning Community Leader.

CLUSTER IV Learning Community Planning and Improvement

EXAMPLE: The staff and students use special resources from the local community in learning programs.

CLUSTER V -Relationships

EXAMPLE: LC members have an effective working relationship as evidenced by responding to one another's needs, trusting one another's motives and abilities, and using techniques of open communication.

CLUSTER VI -The Learning Program

EXAMPLE: A variety of learning activities using different media and modes are used when building learning programs.

CLUSTER VII -Student Responsibilities

EXAMPLE: Each student accepts increasing responsibility for selecting or developing learning activities for specified learning objectives.

At the present time, the Rocky Comfort School's staff has made a decision to work extensively on ten or twelve specific outcomes for the first year of implementation. After the first year, other outcomes will be selected and refined as identified by the school's administration and staff.

The Rocky Comfort School has conducted some formal research on its implementation process. However two national studies of IGE schools conducted for the years 1973 thru 1977 give some indication of what the school may expect in the future. For example, the summary of the "National Evaluation of the IDEA Change Program for IGE" (3) and "How is IGE doing in the Elementary Schools? A Four year Survey of IGE Principals" (5) relate these selected findings: (for a more detailed analysis the reader is encouraged to read the above evaluations which are available from IDEA, 5335 Far Hills Avenue, Dayton, Ohio 45429).

(1) A significant number of teachers believe that students are learning and performing better since IGE was initiated.

(2) General attitudes of administrators, teachers, parents, and students are positive toward IGE.

(3) The majority of teachers believe IGE processes work equally well for slow and fast learners and for culturally advantaged and culturally different learners.

(4) Administrators and students in schools that have participated in IGE for three or more years feel more positive about the educational concepts of IGE than those in the program only one or two years.

(5) In general, reactions to the IGE program are equally positive in schools that have primarily white students and those that are primarily non-white.

(6) Implementing IGE can result in perceived administrator and teacher over-loads especially when the rate of change, the level of support, or the sequence of adoption are not appropriate to the capabilities and resources of participating schools.

(7) One of every three principals reported increased (math & verbal scores on standardized achievement tests.

(8) Students are accepting responsibilities.

(9) Student's learning programs are personal: They are learning how to learn.

(10) Teachers work together, plan together, and improve together. Moreover school decisions are shared with teachers

(11) The predominant view of administrators, parents, and teachers is that IGE produces quality education.

In conclusion, two educational strategies (separated by some sixty years) in the same county of rural Southwest Missouri, one almost obsure but meriting renewed attention and the other gaining momentum and enthusiasm are adding to the relevance and quality of today's educational program for administrators, teachers, students, and the community.

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